

1 Peter 3:8-4:19. Prepared for Persecution

We have all seen ads on TV which show malnourished and maimed people from Somalia or India or some other devastated land and call upon Australians to reach into their pockets. The impact of those graphic images varies from person to person. Some are profoundly moved and may give generously. Others feel their 'conscience' is pricked. But the big problem is to convince comfortable, well-off people to take the plight of others seriously, while they live in a cushioned world of foam rubber, and wall-to-wall carpets, and beautiful drapes, and backyard swimming pools, and nicely trimmed lawns, and microwave ovens, and PCs with CD roms and scanners and laser printers and modems and SEGA systems for the kids, and so many toys for the kids you almost need a room just for the toys alone, and so many books they take up rows and rows.... And so they bring the problem into your living room and give you a shake. Unfortunately, however, a central policy of all TV, as the televising of the Mardi Gras illustrated, is to shock you. So when TV in general is trying to blast a hole through fatty layers of apathy, it is jolly difficult for World Vision to make much headway. The problem seems too remote to even most nice and well-disposed Australians.

I now face a similar problem. How do I apply Peter's teaching on suffering to your lives. Surely, you say, it should not be too hard to do this. You can tell me of personal tragedies, the loss of loved ones, crushing business failures, humiliation, loss of reputation and status, the agony of seeing a loved one die in great pain through cancer, perhaps the pain of discovering that you yourself have contracted this or some other feared disease, the pain of seeing children go off the rails and do damage to their lives, etc.. Suffering is undoubtedly one of the major themes of this epistle. But Peter has not been cooperative. He has not written about suffering in a way which will enable me to generalise it. Apart from his opening remarks about suffering various kinds of trials in 1:6-7, Peter restricts himself, almost exclusively, to one particular kind of suffering. Let me ask you, what kind of suffering is Peter concerned with in this epistle? It is the suffering of persecution.

How do I take this teaching on persecution and make it intensely and personally relevant to a pretty-much unpersecuted people. To do this, I will enter Peter's teaching through the back rather than the front door. We need to start by asking the question: what causes non-Christians to persecute Christians? Then we can consider whether the lack of personal persecution we face is simply because we live in a tolerant, disinterested secular society, or is it because we have cocooned ourselves off from persecution because we are living distorted Christian lives, lopsided Christian lives, lives we have fashioned or modelled ourselves on, simply because they serve to protect us from what otherwise might happen?

In 4:1-4 Peter tells us what happens when we take seriously our distinctiveness as God's people and live conspicuous, uncompromising and unmistakable God-honouring lives: *"Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do - living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you."*

You and I can be sure of one thing. If you live a Christlike life, which is clearly of high moral integrity, then you can bet your bottom dollar that you will be abused and insulted because of it. A young married couple arranged for the husband's mother to spend a week with them, and paid her airfares. Their children were excited about their grandmother coming to visit. When she arrived, the red carpet was rolled out. At first all seemed to be going well. The kids were friendly and well-behaved. Yet before the week was out the non-Christian grandmother could not keep down her bile. She lashed her son with her vicious tongue and told him his wife harboured nasty thoughts towards her. Not one situation had occurred in all that week to justify this absurd accusation. The husband knew how much his wife was prepared to go out of her way to please his mother and express the Christ's love to her. But the twisted mind of the grandmother refused to believe that the lovely Christian wife truly loved her.

I was present when the grandmother villified this man's wife to his face. He responded calmly and gently and, knowing his mother's nature and lostness, tried to reason with her. But even his graciousness was turned back upon him. "Don't be patronising with me," she sneered, "Don't be so superior, looking down on me. What a hypocrite you are to call yourself a Christian." It was a no-win situation. If he had raised his voice to his mother, which he did not, she would have thrown it back in his face as proof of the emptiness of his claim to be a Christian. No doubt a psychologist might raise other questions. However, the husband knew from his long experience of dealings with his mother that at the heart of everything was her refusal to admit that she had ever done anything wrong towards her own kids. It was intolerable for that woman to be in the presence of a genuinely happy, loving Christian family. She could not cope with it.

In the 16th century Thomas Muntzer led a revolt of German peasants against their political masters. Before battling with the German armies, Muntzer promised his followers would be unscathed by the weapons of their enemies. Trustingly the peasants went into battle. 6000 were slaughtered in the ensuing battle. Jesus leads us too into battle. But Jesus tells us the opposite, that we will be attacked and hurt. Indeed in 1:6 Peter speaks of how God's people will inevitably suffer grief or distress, that is, emotional and psychological pain.

If you live truly Christian lives the fact is that many people will despise you for showing them up. When you get up in the middle of a hot humid night to get a drink from the fridge, what may happen when you switch on the light? You spot a cockroach scurrying away into the dark, dirty places to which it belongs. It cannot stand being in the light. Non-Christians are the same. They may not express their intolerance in the same way. We usually do not know what God is doing in the life of any particular non-Christian at any particular point of time. But if you dare to live a conspicuously Christlike life then you will be hated and despised and abused just as he was. If you have not ever experienced this it may well be because you never let your light shine in the dark places. Are you keeping your light under the bushel, or is it out in the open?

Peter stresses the need, if we are persecuted, to be persecuted as Christians. All of us, from time to time, encounter human nastiness and abuse. Peter says in 4:14-15: "*If you suffer, it should not be as a murdered or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*" Maybe you've stopped at a set of traffic lights

and a carload of young, drunken yobbos draw alongside and curse you and use all sorts of foul language against you. But this is not suffering persecution *for being a Christian*. If you never suffer persecution *as a Christian*, could it be that your workmates or neighbours and associates don't take you seriously as a Christian? I know of professing Christians high up in the business world whose business ethics are little better, if not worse, than those of their non-Christians colleagues. Your non-Christian acquaintances might know you go to church but do they see anything about your moral character which so distinguishes you that they are forced to take your claim to know Christ seriously? What impression have those who know you received? That a Christian is someone who goes to church and tries to be nice and do good things and maybe moralise a little or be a bit stuck-up? Or that the most important thing about you is your claim to know Christ personally? Have you made any attempt to identify with other Christians at work, to study the Bible together at lunch times and pray together, especially to pray for your non-Christian colleagues?

In 3:14 Peter quotes from Isaiah 8:12: "*Do not fear what they fear, nor be unsettled.*" God had warned Isaiah not to follow the ways of the people (Isa 8:11), meaning that he, unlike them, must place his trust in God alone (vv13-14, 17) and not depend on the super-power of the day, Assyria, to bale them out of deep trouble. But when Isaiah tells his people not to snuggle up to Assyria, he is regarded as a traitor, as one who effectively is 'conspiring' with Israel's enemies since to ignore Assyria's offer of defence appeared to leave God's people defenceless before their enemies. Maybe the nature of persecution against Christians took an analogous form. Christian refusal to participate in emperor worship and their apparent 'atheism,' was construed by the persecutors of the Christians, as treacherous behaviour which melted the glue which bound the Empire together.

In Isaiah 8:12 the particular fear of the Israelites is that they will be killed, pillaged and tortured by the barbaric forces of two neighbouring countries. When Peter applies this text to us as his readers, he evidently has in mind the 'fear' we have of incurring hostility and abuse from those who despise us for all that we stand for as Christians.

Charles Coulson recalls an example given by Vlaclev Havel, when he became President of Czechoslovakia after the fall of Communism. Havel pictured a Prague greengrocer who, during communist rule, received not only onions and carrots from enterprise headquarters, but also a poster worded "Workers of the world unite!" Wanting to avoid trouble, he compliantly placed the poster in his shop window. That sign showed his fear. There were similar slogans in other shops and most who passed his window ignored the poster. But it still achieved its purpose, to signify his uniformity and obedience to the system.

Then, one day, something in our greengrocer snapped and he refused to put up the posters to ingratiate himself. He stopped voting in elections he knew to be a farce. He decides to be free, to say what he really thinks, to discover afresh his suppressed identity and dignity. His revolt is an attempt to **live within the truth**.

He is stripped of his managerial position and transferred to warehouse, with reduced pay. His holiday plans evaporate and his children's access to higher education is compromised. He is harassed by his superiors and shunned by fellow workers. Yet most of those who mistreat him, will not do so because of any profound personal conviction,

but merely as an outworking of the same compliance to the system which initially pressured the greengrocer to display the official slogans.

A fundamental barrier to effective Christian witness is that we fear what the people of this world fear. Peter tells us, "*Do not fear what non-Christians fear.*" Like the greengrocer, we, like our non-Christian friends and acquaintances around us, want to avoid trouble. Oh, for a quiet, tranquil life! We are, like them, scared of living a life which is at odds with what non-Christians think of as being a socially acceptable life.

Peter tells us not to fear what non-Christians fear. In Isaiah 8 Isaiah goes on to say, "*The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.*" In other words, don't fear people and what they can do to you, but fear God instead. In the same way, Peter urges us, "*Rather regard the Lord Christ as holy in your hearts.*" To prevent our Christian witness from being emasculated by fear we must treat Jesus as holy. That is, we must make him central in our hearts, central to way we think, central to our decision-making process. We must keep our hearts focused on Christ. We are often paralysed in our witness by the fear of what people will say and do to us if we stand up for Jesus, because Jesus doesn't really mean that much to us.

An Australian Christian business executive in a large business corporation, was sitting with others at an annual work dinner. The MC got various executives present to tell jokes to the assembled group. As you might expect the jokes got dirtier and dirtier. Then one executive told a blasphemous joke against Jesus. The Christian businessman could take it no longer. He stood up, and said, "I will not stand for this, you are talking about the one I love." Then he stormed out. Some might say he should have cracked a clean joke in response. Maybe he didn't handle the situation in the wisest way. But I do have a profound respect for that man, because he was prepared to let all know what he stood for and cop the consequences. Indeed, he lost his job. But here was a man who so revered Christ in his heart that he did not fear what they feared; he was prepared to bite the bullet and dare to be different.

Peter also exhorts his readers to be "*constantly...ready to give an answer to all who demand from you an accounting for the hope which you share.*" If a non-Christian asked you why you are a Christian, have you any idea how you would answer them? Could you give a clear, coherent explanation? You only need to prepare an answer if your life is salty and makes people thirsty. If there is no obvious difference about your life no-one would ever ask you such a question in the first place. Why don't we hear more stories of people coming up to Christians and asking them why they have this hope? Because we fail to be a distinctive people of hope. We are too much like the people of this world. Our hope is not conspicuous. It is not obvious and observable. Instead it is hidden, stored away in the shed of our lives. Sometimes like a board game we take it off the cupboard shelf, brush off the dust, and have a time of enjoying the game. But then we put it back on the shelf again.

When we do explain the Gospel, we are to "*do so with humility and fear (of God), having a strong awareness (of God)*". The influence of Isaiah 8 is still upon Peter's thinking. We are to fear God and not what non-Christians fear. In verse 16 Peter encourages us to keep "a clear conscience". The word *conscience* literally means 'consciousness' or 'awareness.' To have a 'clear conscience' is to have a 'pure

consciousness'. The Christian whose relationship with the Lord is right is able to probe his or her present awareness and ascertain whether it is pure or not. Am I aware of the Lord and his greatness? Or am I conscious that something is not quite right, that something stands between us? Humility and fear of God are plainly dependent on having a strong awareness of God's greatness, and it is this 'clear consciousness' which we need if we are to be people who attract the sort of questions of which Peter speaks, and if we are to be poised, ready to respond to such non-Christians and explain to them why they too need to come to Jesus.

May the Lord grant that we fear him alone and not what non-Christians fear. May we dare to be different, knowing that as we do so we may well be persecuted. But may there be those who ask us to explain the hope that we share. Having overcome your fear may the Lord use you to bring many into his kingdom!